

VZCZCXRO1439
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHCO #1227 3551314
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 211314Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY COTONOU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9101
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1025
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

UNCLAS COTONOU 001227

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STATE FOR AF/W:DBANKS, AF/PD:LBEDICHEK

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PROV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [BN](#)

SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS APPEAL FOR RELEASE OF IMPRISONED EDITOR AND REPORTER

¶1. SUMMARY: Two professional media associations have publicly appealed for the release of an editor and a journalist sentenced to six months' imprisonment for defamation. The Minister of Justice has announced that the two were legally sentenced after having violated a law; journalists contend the two could have simply been censured, forced to print a retraction, or fined instead of being imprisoned. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Editor Clement Adechian and reporter Cecil Adjevi, both of the minor daily newspaper L'Informateur, were sentenced to six months' imprisonment for defamation December 1 and began serving their sentences the same day. The conviction stems from an article published October 29 written by Adjevi alleging that a bailiff (identified by his initials) had defrauded a widow and had then raped her to shame her into silence, and that friends of the bailiff had quashed an investigation into the widow's complaint.

¶3. Bailiff Maxime Bankole filed a complaint against Adjevi for having written the article and against Adechian for having run it (even though Adechian reportedly fired Adjevi for having filed the story without consulting with him or submitting it for editorial review). Because neither was able to prove that the allegations of rape were true, they were sentenced to six months in prison.

¶4. Both the National Council of Employers of Press and Audio-Visual (CNPA) and the Union of Media Professionals of Benin (UPMB) called for leniency, running a joint communiqué that acknowledged the need for a responsible press, but arguing that imprisoning journalists solely for their writings tarnishes the democratic image of Benin. The Observatory of Deontology and Ethics in Media (ODEM) also published a communiqué that called for more professional and circumspect reporting, while also appealing to judicial authorities (and to the aggrieved bailiff) for leniency.

¶5. Minister of Justice and government spokesman Abraham Zinzindohoue stated December 18 that he was aware of the concerns of the media, but noted that the judges had acted according to the law, and that it would be inappropriate for the executive branch to attempt to intercede with the judiciary. He also said that he was aware of calls for the relaxation or scrapping of laws regulating the media, but emphasized that the Beninese media would have to behave more responsibly before this would be possible.

¶6. COMMENT: The issue at hand is whether the imprisonment of the journalists is the best way to encourage the free-wheeling Beninese media, which often play fast and loose with facts, to come to heel. Some fear that Benin's image of a democracy with perhaps the freest press in Africa will be tarnished. Previous transgressions of this sort have often been resolved with a public apology and a formal retraction. END COMMENT.

HOLTZAPPLE